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Turner: Saudis not out of touch like shah

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When Stansfield Turner, former head of the CIA, went to see the King of Saudi Arabia in the capital city of Riyadh a few years ago, the king was out of town.

"So they put me in a C-130 and we flew out up toward the Iraq border, landed on the desert, no airfield, just on the sand.

"Got out of the plane, a Cadillac drives up.

"There's nothing in sight, nothing but sand in sight. And we drive across for about 20 minutes, half an hour, past a couple of camels and so on, up and down over the sand dunes, and suddenly we arrive in a tent city."

"Here are all these tents, huge tents. And right in the middle is the satellite antenna. And you call on the king in his tent. The tent has got nothing in it but oriental rugs, a couple of air conditioners, two or three little chairs, and a table. But, by God, on the one table is a telephone. I suppose you could have called anyone in the world in nothing flat."

Now it is a nice story, but why does Stansfield Turner tell it? He tells it to show that Saudi Arabia is not likely to go the way of Iran.

"The reason I tell the story is why is the king there: because the Bedouins of that section come and see him, and talk to him, give him their complaints, ask their questions."

"The Saudi regime has problems ahead of it but they are quite different problems than Iran, and they are rather more distant at the moment. I don't think we've got an incipient instability in Saudi Arabia."

"The shah ruled (Iran) as one man, but there are something like 4,000 princes in the Saudi royal family, and they do rule by consensus.

"I think one of the things that brought the shah down at the end was that he was out of touch, got so isolated with his court advisers."

Did the U.S., advised by the CIA, get "out of touch" with Iran? Why didn't we see what was coming,

both when the shah fell in January 1979, and when the Iranians seized the U.S. Embassy in November of the same year and took our citizens hostage?

They are probably the least pleasant questions Turner will ever face regarding his tenure with the CIA, but the retired admiral, here on holiday and for a speech to an industry group meeting on Kauai, answers readily:

"In Iran there were two things really:

- "We knew there was a lot of discontent in Iran, and informed the policymakers of that, but we didn't consider that a half-dozen different centers of discontent would coalesce under a 79-year-old expatriate cleric," the Ayatollah Khomeini.

- "And when we saw them coalesce, we still felt a man with as much police and military power as the shah possessed would step in at the last moment, or at the right time," Turner said.

"He had the power, but he didn't use it, either because he feared the blood bath it might bring, or because he was too sick a man. But he didn't move. If he had wanted to he could have forestalled it. I'm not saying he would still be in power, but it didn't have to happen in the fall or winter of 1979."

But aren't those developments in Iran exactly what we expect the CIA to be able to foresee?

"We saw the problems: developing, but because it was a coalescence, not a revolutionary plot, there was no opportunity to penetrate the plotters and get their plan. It was a true revolution, not like Lenin being brought in in a boxcar. The people in the bazaars and the religious people, the people in the mosques, decided they would support the ayatollah."

"We might have been better at predicting that at the last minute, but it didn't happen until the last minute."

It is, in Turner's view, a lot to ask of the CIA or any other intelligence agency.

"We are not as omniscient as (spy story writer John) Le Carré would have you believe."

"The function of an intelligence agency is to predict trends, not to

predict coups, assassinations or adverse election results," he said.

"And even if we had predicted that those groups would coalesce against the shah, we would have predicted that he would deal with them successfully."

Still, Turner says, the agency did learn from Iran the "importance of bringing together all the information in the U.S., from all kinds of sources, many of them open. We realized we needed to collect more of this information, and bring it together better."

Regarding the hostages, there were also two factors:

- "In February 1979 they captured our embassy and held our people hostage before the government returned it to our hands."

"We did alert the (U.S.) government — everybody was alerted that it was a constant threat, but we had the precedent that the government of Iran was willing to fulfill its obligation to protect our embassy."

- "To predict the precise thing that happened wasn't possible, and that wasn't the way it started. It was a demonstration, and then after they got in there, various forces led them to say, 'Why don't we stay?' It was like the February exercise, and it went astray after it got started."

Agreeing to help the shah get medical treatment in the U.S. "was a tough judgment call, but the government felt it was worth the risk to honor a commitment to an old friend. It turned out it probably was not, or at least that it was very costly," Turner said.

Saudi Arabia is a different story, he says.

There is no single man to oppose, and "the clergy are part of the governmental process but in a different sense than in Iran. They are part of the establishment although they don't believe in holding office or being out in front or taking over. They're not a threat by tradition to the monarchy."

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The Saudis have problems. The oil money is heating up the economy, and it's going to lead to more demands for spreading that wealth around, although there's so much of it and so few people and the Bedouins basically, you know, can't buy televisions . . . there's a limit to what you can do when you're living in the nomadic sense.

"But as more and more of them become educated in the Western world and go home there will be less opportunity to be absorbed back into the establishment and make a million in your first year or ten or whatever."

Another cause for concern: "If they get beaten in a minor kind of war in South Yemen or somewhere, and they look bad — it's not that they lose their country, you can't conquer all that desert — a lot of people are going to say, 'Gee, you spent eight billion bucks on AWACS and stuff like this and we got beaten.' AWACS doesn't help you when you fight the South Yemeni. That could cause discontent and problems."

"There's the problem of graft. And there's the problem of the royal family, 4,000 strong, giving an image of adhering to the tenets of the Muslim religion adequately."

"So there are seeds of problems ahead. I think they're reasonably conscious of it. And one doesn't think they are the same kind of problems that brought down the Shah of Iran."

In fact, Turner is optimistic about the entire Mideast situation today.

"We've got a great opportunity in the Middle East today . . . to make a big step toward peace," if not to solve the problem. "You can't solve that in less than a couple of decades."

Turner ticks off the favorable conditions:

- "The Camp David process has regained some momentum. Sadat started it just before he died, and we had one meeting with the Israelis, the Egyptians and ourselves."

- "Now we've got the April 25 deadline for the return of the Sinai (to Egypt)." The Israelis know that if they don't give it back, unless there's some really good explanations, it's going to force the Egyptians into the Arab camp.

- "Then, if there's a silver lining in the death of Sadat it's that it reopens the possibility of Saudi Arabia and Egypt talking to each other, and possibly the Saudis or some surrogate for them getting into the peace process, and that's essential."

- Then, "the Israelis must know that someday they've got to deal with the PLO or at least the Palestinians under some guise. The Palestinians know that in order to really make progress they've got to get off this kick of not acknowledging Israel's right to exist."

"I really have hopes that in the next year or so that one way or the other we'll be able to bring a Palestinian presence into the negotiating process and it will be some fig leaf arrangement that will get them there, probably without a PLO label."

- The "other favorable factor is the degree of increasing U.S. involvement in the area. I'm not sure that even the American public appreciates how much more we're becoming committed both to the Arab world out there and its security, and just to being part of the (peace) process."

"On the first of October President Reagan said, 'We're not going to let happen to the Saudi monarchy what happened to Iran.' Well, that's a big step ahead of the Carter Doctrine."

"Then after Sadat's death we started making big moves toward the Sudan, and Egypt, and for the first time the administration said, 'Why don't you Israelis slow down on more settlements, let's sort of keep things on balance.'"

"And we sell AWACS" to Saudi Arabia.

With the "dominant personalities" of Sadat and Carter no longer pushing the peace process, "one hopes that either Begin or Reagan will step forward and move."